

## SOLON

### *Salamis\**

- 1 I bring my own dispatch from lovely Salamis,  
adopting ordered verse instead of speech.
- 2 In that case I would rather be from Sikinos  
or Pholegandros,\* no Athenian,  
for soon the word would go about, 'He's one of  
those  
Athenian Salamis-abandoners.'
- 3 Let's start for Salamis, fight for the lovely isle  
and free ourselves from terrible disgrace.

### Other political poems

- 4 Our state will never fall by Zeus's ordinance  
or the immortal blessed gods' intent:  
such a stout-hearted guardian, she of the mighty  
sire,  
Pallas Athene, holds her hand above:  
but by their foolishness the citizens themselves  
seek to destroy its pride, from avarice,  
with the unprincipled mob-leaders, who are set  
to suffer badly for their great misdeeds.  
They know not how to prosper modestly, enjoy  
in festive peace the happiness they have.

. . . . .

and they grow wealthy by unrighteousness.  
[When wicked men . . .]

and, sparing neither sacred property  
nor public, seize by plunder, each one what he  
can,

careless of Righteousness's august shrine—  
the silent one, who knows what is and has been  
done,

and comes at last to claim the payment due—



this aims a sure blow at the whole community,  
and soon it comes to wretched slavery  
which rouses war from sleep, and strife within the  
clan,

and sunders many from their lovely youth.  
For if men injure their own people, they soon find  
their lovely city scarred and faction-torn.

Among the populace these evils roam at large,  
and many of the poor folk find themselves  
in foreign lands, sold into slavery and bound  
in shameful bonds . . .

And so the public ill comes home to every man:  
the yard doors are no more disposed to hold;  
it leaps the high wall, and it finds him out for sure,  
though he take refuge in his inmost room.

This lesson I desire to teach the Athenians:

Lawlessness brings the city countless ills,  
while Lawfulness sets all in order as is due;  
many a criminal it puts in irons.

It makes the rough smooth, curbs excess, effaces  
wrong,

and shrivels up the budding flowers of sin;  
it straightens out distorted judgements, pacifies  
the violent, brings discord to an end,  
brings to an end ill-tempered quarrelling. It makes  
all men's affairs correct and rational.

4a I mark—and sorrow fills my heart upon the sight—  
the eldest country of Ionia\*  
listing.

4c And as for you, who now have all the wealth you  
want,  
make the stern spirit gentler in your hearts,  
adjust to moderation. We will not accept  
this state of things, nor will it work for you.

5 The commons I have granted privilege enough,  
not lessening their estate nor giving more;  
the influential, who were envied for their wealth,  
I have saved them from all mistreatment too.



I took my stand with strong shield covering both  
sides,  
allowing neither unjust dominance.

6 Thus would the commons and its leaders best  
accord,  
not given too free a rein, nor pushed too hard.  
Surplus breeds arrogance, when too much wealth  
attends  
such men as have no soundness of intent.

7 Hard to please everyone in politics.

9 As from the cloudbank comes the storm of snow or  
hail,  
and thunder follows from the lightning flash,  
exalted men portend the city's death: the folk  
in innocence fall slave to tyranny.  
Raise them too high, and it's not easy afterwards  
to hold them. Now's the time to read the signs.

10 A short time now will show the Athenians how  
mad  
I am,\* when truth comes out for all to see.

11 If by your own fault you have suffered grief and  
harm,  
put no part of the blame upon the gods.  
You raised these men up,\* by providing  
bodyguards,  
and that's why wretched slavery's your lot.  
Your trouble is, each of you treads the fox's way,  
but your collective wits are thin as air.  
You watch a crafty fellow's tongue, and what he  
says,  
but fail to look at anything he does.

12 It's by the winds the sea's disturbed: if nobody  
stirs it, it stays of all things best-behaved.

13 Bright daughters of Olympian Zeus and Memory,  
Pierian Muses, hearken to my prayer.  
Grant me that I have fortune from the blessed  
gods,  
and good repute from all men all the time;



may I be honey to my friends, gall to my foes,  
 honoured on sight or feared respectively.  
 Wealth I desire, but not to hold unrighteously,  
 for surely sometime retribution comes.  
 The riches that the gods give are dependable  
 from top to bottom of the storage jar,  
 but those that mortals cultivate with violence  
 come awkward and unwilling at the call  
 of crime, and soon are tangled in calamity,  
 which from a small beginning grows like fire,  
 a trifling thing at first, but grievous in the end,  
 for mortal violence does not live long.  
 Zeus supervises every outcome. Suddenly  
 like a March wind he sweeps the clouds away,  
 a gale that stirs the billowing ocean to its bed  
 and ravages the tidy fields of wheat  
 before ascending to the gods' high seat in heaven,  
 and then, behold, the sky is clear again:  
 the strong sun shines out on the fertile countryside  
 in beauty; not a cloud remains to see.  
 Such is the punishment of Zeus. He does not flare  
 at every insult, like a mortal man,  
 but all the time he is aware whose heart is marked  
 with sin, and in the end it shows for sure.  
 One pays at once, another later; and if some  
 escape the gods' pursuing fate themselves,  
 it comes sometime for sure: the innocent will pay—  
 their children, or their later family.  
 Whether of high or low degree, we mortals think  
 our various vanities are running well  
 until some blow falls; then we moan. But up to then  
 we take fond pleasure in our empty hopes.  
 Whoever is oppressed by comfortless disease  
 gets the idea he will return to health.  
 A man of low esteem imagines it is high;  
 an ill-shaped man is proud of his good looks;  
 propertyless, and in the grip of poverty,  
 he still has fancies of acquiring wealth.  
 They bustle on their different ways: one roams the  
 sea



hoping to bring some profit home from trade,  
tossed by tempestuous winds where fishes wait  
below,  
with no concession made to life and limb.  
Another carves the soil—his business is the  
plough—  
and slaves away till fruit-time ends the year;  
another's learnt Athena's and Hephaestus' craft,\*  
and earns a living by his handiwork.  
Another has been taught the Olympian Muses'  
boon,  
skilled in the rules of lovely poesy;  
another one the lord Apollo's made a seer,  
who sees disaster coming from afar,  
if he is favoured by the gods; but what is doomed  
no augury or sacrifice averts.  
Others are healers, Paeon's office, well resourced  
in drugs: they too can give no guarantees.  
Often a minor pain becomes an agony  
that cannot be relieved by soothing drugs,  
whereas another, crazed by terrible disease,  
under the doctor's hands is quickly cured.  
Fate brings to mortal men both good and ill: the  
gifts  
the immortals give are inescapable.  
There's risk in every undertaking. No one knows,  
when something starts, how it will finish up.  
One man makes noble efforts, but despite them  
all  
falls into unforeseen calamity;  
another handles ill, yet God gives him complete  
success, freed from his folly's consequence.  
But as to wealth, no limit's laid down clear for  
men,  
since those among us who possess the most  
strive to earn double. Who could satisfy them all?  
Remember, profit's in the immortals' gift,  
but loss's source is in men's selves: when sent by  
Zeus  
to punish them, it comes to each in turn.



- 14 Nor yet is any mortal fortunate, but all  
are wretched that the sun looks down upon.
- 15 For many curs are rich, and men of class are poor,  
but we'll not take their riches in exchange  
for our nobility, which always stays secure,  
while wealth belongs to different men by turns.
- 16 But wisdom's hidden formula, which holds the key  
to all things, is the hardest to discern.
- 17 The gods' intent is hidden every way from man.
- 18 As I grow old I'm always learning more.
- 19 (*To Philocyprus, king of Soloi in Cyprus*)  
But now I wish you many years of life and rule  
in Soloi here, you and your family:  
to me may Cypris\* of the violet garland grant  
a safe, swift voyage from this famous isle.  
Favour and glory on this settlement may she  
bestow, and fair return to my own land.
- 20\* 'I pray my death may catch me at threescore  
years'  
If you'll still listen to me, take that out—  
don't mind me having wiser thoughts than  
you—  
and change it, Ligyastades, and sing,  
'I pray my death may come at fourscore years.'
- 21 Nor may my death come unlamented: when I die,  
I want to leave my friends with grief and groans.
- 22a And please tell tawny-haired young Critias\* to  
heed  
his father—he'll be taking no bad guide.
- 23 Happy the man who has his sons, his hounds,  
his horses, and a friend from foreign parts.
- 24 Equally rich is he who has abundance  
of silver, gold, and acres under plough,  
horses and mules, and he that only has the means  
to eat well, couch well, and go softly shod,  
and by and by enjoy a lad's or woman's bloom,  
with youth and strength still his to suit his need.



This is a man's true wealth: he cannot take all those  
possessions with him when he goes below.  
No price he pays can buy escape from death, or  
grim  
diseases, or the onset of old age.

25 While youth's delight still flowers, and one loves a  
lad,  
sweet lips and thighs the object of desire.

26 But now I like the gods of love and wine and song  
and what they do for human happiness.

27 A boy, an ungrown child, in seven years puts forth  
a line of teeth and loses them again;  
but when another seven God has made complete,  
the first signs of maturity appear.

In the third hebdomad he's growing yet, his chin  
is fuzzy, and his skin is changing hue,  
while in the fourth one, each achieves his peak of  
strength,

the thing that settles whether men are men.  
The fifth is time a man should think of being wed  
and look for sons to carry on his line;  
and by the sixth he's altogether sensible,  
no more disposed to acts of fecklessness.

With seven hebdomads and eight—fourteen more  
years—

wisdom and eloquence are at their peak,  
while in the ninth, though he's still capable, his  
tongue

and expertise have lost some of their force.  
Should he complete the tenth and reach the  
measured line,

not before time he'd have his due of death.

28 There I dwelt  
at the Nile's mouth, hard by Canopus' shore.

29 Poets say much that's false.

30 Rulers must be obeyed, however right or wrong.

31 First let us pray to Zeus, to Kronos' son the king,  
to grant these laws success and high prestige.



32 (*To Phocus*)

If I have spared  
my country, if I've not disgraced my name  
by grasping brute force and dictatorship,  
I'm not ashamed: this way I think I'll win  
more people over.

33

I know many people say  
'Solon is a stupid fellow, not a man who thinks  
ahead:  
God has offered him a fortune, but he hasn't taken  
it.  
There he had the prey encircled, but he didn't  
close the net—  
lost his nerve, no doubt about it, and his common  
sense as well.  
I'd not mind, if I'd seized power and the city's  
lavish wealth  
and become the lord of Athens even for a single  
day,  
being flayed to make a wineskin, with my family  
wiped out.'

34

Others came along for plunder. They had hopes of  
being rich,  
every one of them expecting he would make his  
fortune there  
and that I, for all my cooing, would reveal a harsh  
intent.  
After those vain calculations now they're furious  
with me,  
and they all look sideways at me, just as if I were  
their foe—  
wrongly. The decrees I uttered had the blessing of  
the gods,  
and I took no foolish further measures, since I  
have no taste  
by dictator's force to . . . or to see our fruitful  
land  
portioned out to good-for-nothings equally with  
men of worth.



36 Those aims for which I called the public meeting—  
which of them, when I stopped, was still to  
achieve?

I call as witness in the court of Time  
the mighty mother of the Olympian gods,  
dark Earth, from whom I lifted boundary-stones\*  
that did beset her—slave before, now free.

And many to Athena's holy land  
I brought back, sold abroad illegally  
or legally, and others whom their debts  
had forced to leave, their speech no longer Attic,  
so great their wanderings; and others here  
in ugly serfdom at their masters' mercy  
I set free. These things I did in power,  
blending strength with justice, carried out  
all that I promised. I wrote laws for all,  
for high and low alike, made straight and just.  
But if another man had got the goad,  
someone imprudent or acquisitive,  
he'd not have checked the mob. If I'd agreed  
to what the opposition favoured then,  
and then to what the other party thought,  
this city would be mourning many dead.  
Therefore I turned to guard my every side,  
a wolf at bay amid a pack of hounds.

37 If I must spell out where the mob's at fault,  
they never would have dreamt what they have  
now

. . . . .

while all the bigger and the stronger men  
would then approve of me and call me friend.  
For if another man had got the goad,  
he'd not have checked the mob, or been content  
until he'd churned the milk and lost the cream.  
I marked the frontier in the No Man's Land  
between these warring parties.

38 . . . they drink; and some of them eat cakes,  
some bread, and others pastries mixed with lentils.  
Nor are they lacking any sort of bake



that the dark earth provides for mortal men,  
but everything is freely there at hand.

39-40

Some run for the mortar,  
others for pickles, or for vinegar,  
or pomegranate-seeds, or sesame.



## Solon

*Salamis*: this poem originally contained about 100 lines. In it Solon urged the despondent Athenians not to give up the struggle with Megara for retention of Salamis; he represented himself as a herald arrived from the island. We are told that the exhortation was effective and that Salamis was duly recovered.

- 2 *Sikinos or Pholegandros*: petty Aegean islands.
- 4a *the eldest country of Ionia*: Ionia covers Athens and the surrounding region (Attica), Euboea, most of the islands of the central Aegean, and most of the Greek colonies on the coast of Anatolia. Athens claimed to be the earliest inhabited.
- 10 *how mad I am*: some of Solon's political opponents had impugned his sanity.
- 11 *You raised these men up*: the authors who quote these lines supposed the reference to be to the dictatorship of Pisistratus, which began in about 561. But Solon speaks of plural tyrants—perhaps some earlier junta of which we know nothing.
- 13 *Athena's and Hephaestus' craft*: these were patron deities of craftsmen, at Athens especially of potters.
- 19 *Cypris*: the goddess of Cyprus, Aphrodite.
- 20 Solon quotes and criticizes a line of Mimnermus (6. 2), who appears to be still alive. The name by which he is addressed, *Ligyastades*, may mean 'melodious singer'.
- 22a *Critias*: son of Solon's brother Dropides, and a great-great-grandfather of Plato.



- 36 *from whom I lifted boundary-stones*: Solon had helped those in the poverty trap by a general cancellation of existing debts. The boundary-stones in question had marked mortgaged land.